

COMING OF AGE IN THE BOX: SOCIAL FUNCTION  
AND JAPANESE KARAOKE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Karaoke in Japan is all too often overlooked as simply being a leisure activity. Even the scholarly work that has looked at karaoke in various terms has usually been limited to topics such as communication, social class and individualism versus collectivism. A structural-functionalist approach is utilized in analyzing the karaoke box in terms of the social function that the box provides, and is complemented by the use of the theories of socialization and dramaturgy. Though the karaoke box is emphasized, different karaoke spaces are also examined in terms of the age and sex of frequenters. The result is that the karaoke box aids in the transition from youth to adulthood in various ways, which is a large part of the social function that the karaoke box provides in Japanese society. This and other social functions of the karaoke box is demonstrated through academic research, participant observation and casual interviews.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception and rise to popularity in the early 1970s, karaoke has become world renowned. Karaoke has spread far beyond Japan and is not confined to Asia. Practitioners pass on certain rules of conduct that are easily conveyed. However, what is less often considered is what the actions happening at karaoke actually mean. As a socially embedded practice, the deeper social meanings that the Japanese karaoke box conveys for Japanese may not necessarily translate to other cultures. This paper will show why the Japanese karaoke box is important to Japanese society beyond the obvious entertainment value that it offers. I approach this task using a structural-functionalist framework together with the ideas of group socialization and dramaturgy to show what activities in the Japanese karaoke box do for Japanese society.

Much of the previous work on Japanese karaoke has looked at topics such as communication, social class, and individualism and collectivism, amongst others, and much has been focused on karaoke bars (Mitsui and Hosokawa, 1998). Looking at karaoke boxes sheds new light on previous research—the social function of the box will be analyzed in terms of structural-functionalism. Chapter 1 of this thesis presents reasons why structural-functionalism will be utilized to analyze the karaoke box. It also discusses the value that the theories of socialization and dramaturgy add to understanding the performative aspects of what occurs at karaoke boxes. Chapter 2 examines different types of karaoke spaces and breaks down the categories of those who frequent them. The

main point of this chapter is to show how Japan's age grade society creates the niche market for karaoke boxes and how their spaces are constructed to accommodate that particular market. Chapter 3 shows why the youth are the ones who frequent karaoke boxes the most while covering various social functions that the box provides. Entertainment is of course one reason why youth frequent the box, but going to the box is much different from other forms of entertainment such as watching television or participating in school-sponsored club activities. In addition to being able to have fun and relax while actively participating and not being told what to do, the karaoke box allows youth to form social bonds among peers outside of schools based on mutual interest. This chapter will show how the karaoke box helps to prepare youth for adulthood and the transition into this next stage in their lives. It will also deal specifically with the box as a social space and how it helps to provide society and groups within society chances to solidify their social solidarity. In addition, I will discuss the idea of group socialization and show why that is important for society—especially in a space where the youth predominate. In the end, the reader will understand how the Japanese karaoke box aids greatly with the transition into adulthood of the Japanese youth.



## CHAPTER 1

### THEORY

The theory used in this paper will be of a structural-functionalism as formulated by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. According to Radcliffe-Brown, different vital institutions within society have specific purposes, and so for society to function effectively, most of these institutions need to work together in harmony. In other words, in order to maintain stability, institutions and cultural practices work together in order to hold up the underlying structure of society. Though Radcliffe-Brown has been said to be the father of structural-functionalism, the base of his theory relies on the ideas of many other men who have come before him. For example, he used Herbert Spencer's organic analogy (Radcliffe-Brown 1935: 180) and was well aware of how Émile Durkheim stressed the importance of cohesion within social groups (Macdonald 2007: 97).

One reason for choosing Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism is that many Japanese see their own society in structural-functionalist terms (Takahashi 2007: 331). In addition, a purpose of Radcliffe-Brown's structural-functionalism is finding the function of certain institutions within society by analyzing said institutions. While the theories of Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski are quite similar in many respects, there is one major difference between the two that has influenced my decision to take an approach to this topic that is more along the lines of the theory of Radcliffe-Brown.

Radcliffe-Brown “implies that society itself has ‘needs’ which must be satisfied by the actions of its members rather than the other way around as in Malinowski’s approach” (Layton 1997: 35). Speaking of society as an organism, Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 297) stated that

As long as it lives the organism preserves a certain continuity of structure although it does not preserve the complete identity of its constituent parts. It loses some of its constituent molecules by respiration or excretion; it takes in others by respiration and alimentary absorption. Over a period its constituent cells do not remain the same. But the structural arrangement of the constituent units does remain similar.

Thus, the individual needs, desires and circumstances of the people participating at the karaoke box are not of as much importance to this type of study as are the roles that they play within society and how the box helps them to fulfill these roles. It is needed for society to continue producing young members and teaching them how to become adults who can act properly in society which is accomplished through the experiences and interactions with others at the box. This is one way through which society sustains itself, and one place in which this happens is the karaoke box.

Malinowski showed more of a focus on the individual and the importance of the individual’s desires within society. Someone using an approach following the theory of Malinowski would, in their analysis, focus on “not merely the emotional as well as the intellectual side of mental processes,” but also the idea “that man in his full biological reality has to be drawn into our analysis of culture,” which means that “[t]he bodily needs and environmental influences, and the cultural reactions to them, have thus to be studied side by side” (Malinowski, 1939: 275). Though the individual is important, it is not necessary to place a main focus on the individual and his/her desires in order to

understand the social function of the karaoke box. Radcliffe-Brown wrote about an activity as “the part it plays in the social life as a whole” (1952: 180). A group of people (in this case, the youth) in general may be important, but what is most important is the function(s) within society that the box provides and what it does for social cohesion both within this group and between this group and society as a whole, which will be seen below. Thus, Radcliffe-Brown’s approach to analyzing the social structure of society is most useful in this case.

A common criticism of Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functionalism is his lack of attention to the history of cultures. For example, Max Gluckman argued that not enough attention was paid to the past colonization in colonial Africa in his *The Bridge* (1958). E. E. Evans-Pritchard agreed with the thinking of Gluckman when he wrote, “It seems to me, that anthropologists (include me if you wish) have, in their writings about African societies, dehumanized the Africans into systems and structures and lost the flesh and blood” (Moore 2009: 171). Radcliffe-Brown batted away criticisms such as this by arguing that he did not have any objections to history, but to pseudo-history—an artificial construction of history—which was being used due to a lack of actual records (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:3).

A few issues that should be addressed are as follows: postmodernism’s critique of using meta-narratives to analyze society, and conflict theorists’ critique of overemphasizing integration and consensus (Holmwood 2005:100). Postmodernists tend to criticize meta-narratives because they are no longer convincing to modern people as they can pose a danger when they are not acknowledged as a limited perspective or as just one way of understanding society. I recognize that the structural-functionalist way of

analyzing the karaoke box and its function in regard to society is simply one way of understanding society, and acknowledge that there are many other ways that can provide valuable insights.

In regard to giving too much attention to integration and consensus, Japan has long been regarded as a society that favors just that—or, to use more familiar words to those who have dealt with Japanese society, Japanese society (for the most part) highly favors conformity (Toivonen et al. 2011: 4). Thus, in this particular situation, it makes sense to pay attention to the function of the karaoke box in terms of Japanese society as a whole. It must be noted, however, that individualism and nonconformity can also be found in Japanese society and certain parts of them are in fact valued in many situations provided that it is kept within particular limits and society is not inconvenienced. For example, it is not regarded as simply acceptable to visit a brothel. However, as long as it does not have a negative impact on one's social and familial duties to society and their family, it is accepted and sometimes even encouraged.

By using the karaoke box as a lens to examine the transition through which Japanese youth pass to become adults, we will be able to understand the characteristics of that passage more clearly. The youth are in a transitional period and are in need of a place at which they can establish themselves outside of the family and strengthen relations with peers in assuming more adult roles in society. The box is one institution that helps with this process. Although structural-functionalism is the main theory that can help us understand the social function of the karaoke box, I also incorporate the theoretical work on socialization and the theory of dramaturgy.

Spanning across many disciplines, socialization has received much attention. For this paper, I look particularly at the insights gained in the theory of group socialization that social psychologist Judith Harris provides. Much of her work (i.e., 1995, 1998 and 2006) has dealt with the socialization of groups and the debate of “nature versus nurture,” both of which are relevant to the way in which I look at the karaoke box. This group socialization is part of the social function of the karaoke box and thus, adds to the social cohesion in society. As a child approaches the age of maturity, they depend less and less on their parents and families, and more on their peer groups, which also have a greater influence on their personality and behavior as they become adults. Harris (1995: 458-89) claims that this secondary socialization—as she calls it—is the largest factor in determining a person’s personality later on in life. In fact, she goes so far as to say that parents have very little if any effect at all on the developing personality of their children. I agree with Harris that this youthful period usually has the most effect on the youth, but the learning that one acquires with their families does not simply disappear—it is a base coat upon which experience and knowledge is added. The time that youth spend alone with their friends acts as a balance to the socialization that takes place with families and while at school.

Others such as Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) and Erik Erikson (1959) also deal with socialization, but in different ways that are not as useful for this thesis—Kohlberg studied how people acquire moral reasoning, while Erikson explained the life stages through which all people pass. These are not congruent with the objectives of this thesis because 1) though Kohlberg’s “moral reasoning” may be an important characteristic that is refined within groups, it is not the focus of this thesis, and 2) Erikson focused on the

challenges that one experiences throughout their life course rather than the socialization as a whole that takes place within groups. These theories are a part of group socialization, but Harris's theory encompasses all and thus fits better with this thesis.

As groups of two or more consist of the vast majority of frequenters of karaoke boxes, Harris' group socialization is especially relevant and important. The majority of frequenters of the box are in this transition stage and these karaoke goers are preparing for adulthood. Although the youth view the box purely as a form of entertainment, the box facilitates this preparation for adulthood in addition to providing an enticing place for it to happen. It is true that in adulthood, one is likely to be put in positions where one will be with people who are not close acquaintances. For example, when one starts a new job or moves into a new residence, most—if not all—of the people around them in these environments will be new and unfamiliar. However, this is not what the majority of adulthood consists of—this is but a very limited period compared to the rest of the time when a person will have become used to their surroundings and will be surrounded by familiar faces and friends. This is one function of schools and other organizations as youth increase in age—people will be surrounded by unfamiliar faces and will learn how to communicate with others. The box allows the youth a place to bond through interest rather than social place. The purpose of the box is to strengthen ties between those who are already friends or acquaintances, to give the youth a place to practice communicating with these types of people, and to help them prepare for adulthood and adult roles. Moving out on one's own, acquiring employment, and starting and maintaining a family are all roles that are a part of adulthood. Age is not a sure indicator of adulthood, though it is usually fairly accurate.

The theory of dramaturgy enables us to analyze the performance training and how this can carry over into other social areas. It can also help us to understand the social functions that the karaoke box offers society including offering a private place that is optimal for group socialization. As merely the basics of this theory will be used, the pioneering theory of Erving Goffman (1959) will be drawn upon and the ideas and theories of others are not necessary for this paper. In using Goffman's theory of dramaturgy as discussed below, I will attempt to show that the karaoke box is part of the play of life. There are acts and experiences that we go through in life that seem to be planned out—everyone goes through these same things. In the karaoke box, though the person, or persons, singing might be thought of as being in the front stage, and the audience being in the back stage, this is not the case. According to Goffman (1959: 13), the front stage is where someone is around other people, which has an effect on their actions, and the back stage is where someone is alone or in a situation where others will not have an effect on their actions. For example, a waitress at a café will be on the front stage when she is in an area that the customers can see her, but will be on the back stage when in an area where customers, or anyone else such as a manager or others that may have an influence on how she acts, are not. Everyone in the karaoke box is on the front stage, though the performer(s) is in the spotlight on this front stage, while those in the audience are “supporting actors.” This will explain why the audience acts in the manner that they do, as will be seen below.

Without the karaoke box, Japanese society will not fail. However, the karaoke box is just one example of a type of institution that is necessary for Japanese society as these types of institutions or spaces are needed for the Japanese youth to prepare for

adulthood. Everything in society has a function, and many things have multiple functions. As will be emphasized and elaborated in more detail below, karaoke performs multiple social functions—such as helping the youth to transition to adulthood—within Japanese society and has an importance to society that can be seen in various ways. This will be seen through what it does for society not only directly, but also indirectly. This paper will also make use of the theories of group socialization and dramaturgy to define what the function of the box is and how the socialization is framed.

For the purpose of this paper, the main concentration will be the karaoke box since karaoke is the main obvious activity that occurs there—more-so than bars or other karaoke spaces. In addition, the youth will be a main point of attention since they make up the majority of frequenters of karaoke boxes. With that being said, age and its relation to karaoke should now be explained in some detail.



## CHAPTER 2

### AGE, SPACE AND GENDER

#### **Cohorts and Karaoke**

It can be argued that all societies have age cohorts, but there are societies in which these cohorts can be seen as being more defined. In order to show the importance of age cohorts, I elect to use an example from Siegfried Nadel's *Witchcraft in Four African Societies* (1952). In this piece, he analyzed two pairs of societies, one of which shows important differences that societies can have with their age cohorts. The Korongo and the Mesakin of Central Sudan were both very similar to each other. They both lived in the same area and in similar environments, spoke different—but similar—languages, had similar matrilineal kinship systems, and both societies had age grades and inheritance. As they both also had matrilineal kinship systems, inheritance passed from mother's brother to sister's son. Many problems existed with the Mesakin in terms of passing through their three age groups because of the abruptness of change. However, the Korongo had six different age brackets, so the transitions to these elder statuses were less onerous—the men were gradually prepared for what they always knew would eventually happen.

Most societies are made up with some sort of an age-grade system, but there are some that have more defined cohorts such as those that can be found in some parts of

Africa and Asia, including Japan (Traphagan 1998: 339). Age cohorts are very apparent in Japanese history. Traphagan (1998: 340) showed the five basic age grades of the hamlet of Jonai. Edward Norbeck (1953: 380-81) also gives examples of different sets of age cohorts from over 60 years ago from Japanese villages. Though briefly, he even addressed female cohorts and *Fujinkai* (women's groups), namely *Chuba* (Middle-aged women) and *Obaba* (elderly women). It would be optimal in a larger study to clarify these female cohorts to some extent, but for the sake of simplicity I will use the same age cohorts for both male and female. Japan operates in somewhat the same way as the Korongo or the Mesakin, as its age cohorts have more defined boundaries than other societies. Since the age cohorts are more defined, it follows that these cohorts should have many of the same interests or do many of the same things. Japan being somewhat neatly organized into age-groups justifies the below mentioned age cohorts to be used for this study.

In order to analyze the age cohorts of the youth and show the relevance of them with social function and karaoke, I need to outline a few details. I have chosen to bracket the age cohorts into the following basic groups: 0-13, 14-25, and from 26 up. Age grades for the elderly exist though are outside the scope of this thesis. These may seem like rather peculiar age groups, so details on the groups and reasons why they have been chosen and grouped as they have are as follows.

The 0-13 cohort realistically consists of children from approximately preschool-age up to and through elementary school, and also the transition to middle school. Those in this cohort usually spend much of their time with their families, which can especially be seen in their earlier years and becomes less pronounced towards the upper end of this

cohort. Before the age of 14, children are mainly going to karaoke with their families, and are not acting entirely on their own. For this reason, the younger ages within this age bracket will more than likely follow the leads and instructions of others. They can be seen frequenting more often as they become more independent and cognizant of their world.

The cohort which I wish to refer to when speaking of the youth is from ages 14 to 25, though one could also make distinctions within this group. High school (including the year or so of cramming for the high school entrance exams) is a clear mark of age and a period in life. Youth generally start becoming even more independent as they progress through this cohort. While those who are grouped in this cohort are still likely to go to karaoke with their families, they tend to go to karaoke with friends who they know from school, cram school, other activities, or who live in the same neighborhood. They will go to karaoke mainly to fulfill the demands of their own desires; they are more likely to go for entertainment or to be with friends than anything else. The types of friends they go with will include more of the same sex the younger they are, but as they grow older, the number of people of the opposite sex with whom they go to karaoke will rise. This occurs not only with karaoke, but with most activities. This time is also when youths start to look even more to their friends than to their parents for advice and approval.

Graduating from high school usually brings many changes to a person. Life as they know it transforms significantly whether such change comes through a new job or entrance into a college or university. Regardless, their social networks change in many ways and are many times left completely altered. Those of this age are being forced into the transition from childhood to adulthood, and though some of them find part time

jobs—and thus, start inching toward the next cohort somewhat sooner—most of them continue on to higher education. The main duty of more than half of them now is to study, but they frequently find themselves with more free or unscheduled time than they have before. Activities such as karaoke often fill some of this free time. In addition, a mixture of the sexes is likely to be seen more often with this group.

The 14-25 cohort is when the process of transitioning from family and secondary school life to more independent living occurs. Toward the end of this cohort is when one's relationships start to change, and in most cases this is the transition from school life to working life. This cohort is expected to be seen making a significant change in relation to the people with whom they frequent karaoke the most. During these years, as the youth begin to graduate and find themselves acquiring full-time work, many of them are also introduced to and start to experience the life of being part of a company. That is, they suddenly find themselves going to many office parties amongst other activities throughout the year. At many or at least some of these office parties, there will be karaoke. Another activity that will take them to karaoke is that of entertaining clients. Both of these types of activities are done with those with whom they are affiliated through work. It must be noted, however, that males are more likely to be the ones who are entertaining clients.

The cohort of people aged 26 and up has a basic trend. From one's mid-twenties on, the ties between co-workers become much stronger, karaoke will be frequented more often with these co-workers for this reason, and frequency of the box and karaoke in general decreases, while frequency of going to the karaoke bar increases. The separation of males and females in karaoke spaces will be more pronounced in this cohort since life

courses generally take them in different directions. Males are the ones who usually work for the family, while the social expectation for females is to fulfill domestic roles first. Though some females do pursue lifelong careers, this is not the norm as can be seen with the still prevalent M-curve in women's labor force participation (Sugimoto 2010: 163). Furthermore, the mean age at first marriage for Japanese is 29.65—with females at 28.8 and males at 30.5—while the average age at the time of the birth of their first child is 29.9 for females and 32 for males—an average of 30.95. This seems to be another reason for the falling percentage of frequenting the karaoke box in one's late twenties. Graduation and the start of a career initiates the decline in attendance, and marriage reinforces it. To many people, it may not seem that marriage would have much of an effect on this. As seen with the above data, however, couples become pregnant and have their first child within their first year and a half of marriage. The lack of time and energy that comes with having a child—especially one's first, as everything is usually new—prevents new parents from going to the karaoke box as much as before if at all. As will be seen below, karaoke use differs in later years as men and women tend to follow a different life course as roles for men and women further diverge, and the circumstances under which people frequent karaoke differ greatly.

It might be thought that people retain their same musical interests as they grow older. However, as Christine Yano (2002: 6) hinted at with her example of *enka* (a type of country-western music style in Japan), it may be that the activities of certain age cohorts stay the same—what changes is the interests of the people that pass in and out of those cohorts. Specifically, she used the example of people, who had never really enjoyed *enka* before, passing into the older age bracket from around age 60 and up, and

suddenly finding a new interest in—or rather, uncovering their interest in—*enka* through the nostalgia that this genre helps to evoke. While it is true that many of the elder population enjoy karaoke, their percentage of karaoke frequency is dwarfed by that of the youth. One reason for this is the lack of free time that is an effect of increasing responsibilities that comes with age. As with most other things, age is an enormous factor with the frequency of karaoke boxes. The two graphs below show the rough percentage of karaoke participants by age for the years 1995, 2001, 2002 and 2006. Different age groups were used in some of the different studies, so I have attempted to manually line up both graphs in terms of age

Regardless of the obvious differences in the graphs, there is one thing that is quite certain. The percentage of karaoke goes in general is very high among younger ages, and declines with age. Figure 1 is a much more general slope, but still reflects this general pattern. What it does not reflect, however, is the extremely steep rising slope

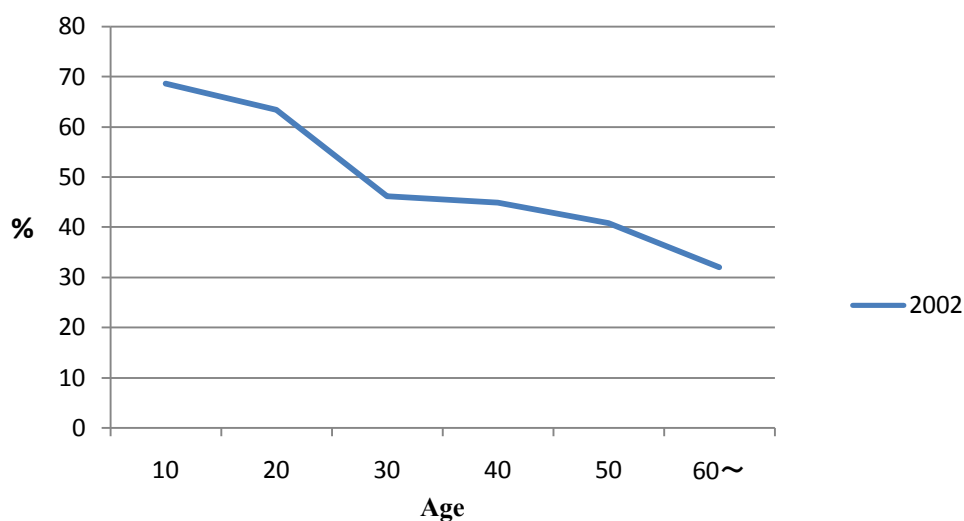


Figure 1 - Karaoke Participants By Age  
(Adapted from 2003 Leisure White Book)

from the younger ages; the year 1995 in Figure 2 also does not reflect this rising slope, as data begins with the 15-19 age group. As indicated above, before approximately 14 years of age, children will be frequenting karaoke with their families for the most part. Adding to this is the peak of karaoke use that lies between the ages of 15 and 26. Teenagers are expected to become more and more independent, and the college ages are where such independence should reach a high point, but is then expected to fall into a decline soon thereafter. This decline is also about the same time that college graduates begin to enter the work force. Upon graduation, the freedom they may have had in school is usually replaced with long, fixed hours at their jobs. They are forced to conform to dress and behavioral codes and are expected to do what their superiors tell them. The decline of karaoke use after 30 years of age is relatively smooth from that point on. This is partly due to the lack of time that comes with a full time job and a family. Even after retirement age, when it is expected that people should have more free time, the rate of frequenting karaoke does not rise. Furthermore, as noted above, the spike in attendance comes at a unique period in one's life course. This is connected to youth, but also relates to karaoke spaces.

As is evident from Figure 3, the younger a person is, the more they are likely to frequent karaoke boxes instead of karaoke bars, while as a person grows older, they tend to frequent boxes less and bars more. It must be noted that one reason why the different age cohorts have been specified above is that it emphasizes that there is not a sudden switch from one karaoke space to another. This shows why the use of boxes drops and bars rise as one becomes older, as is apparent from Figure 3.

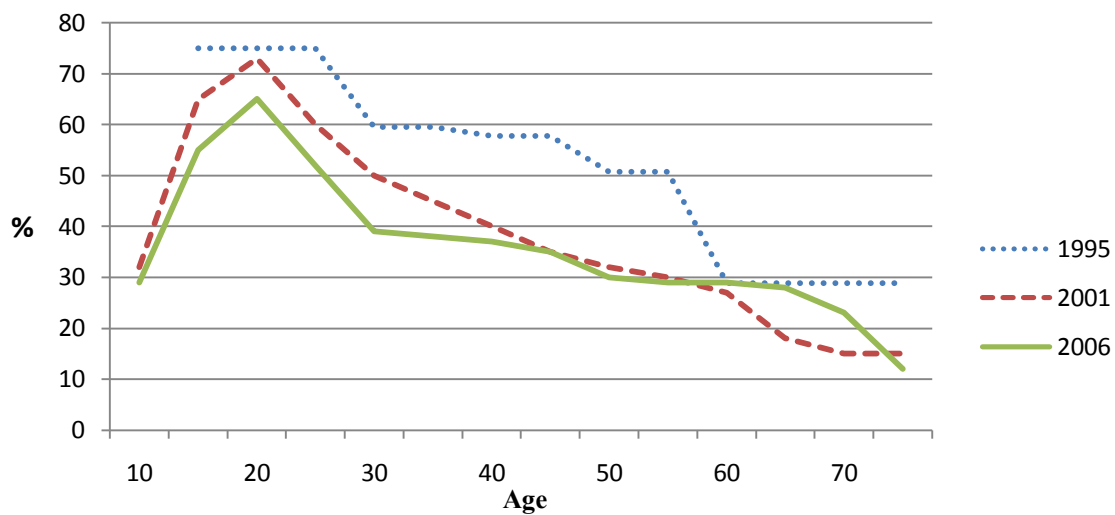


Figure 2 - Karaoke Participants By Age Compared  
(Adapted from Yoka Kaihatsu Center 1996 and [www.stat.go.jp](http://www.stat.go.jp))

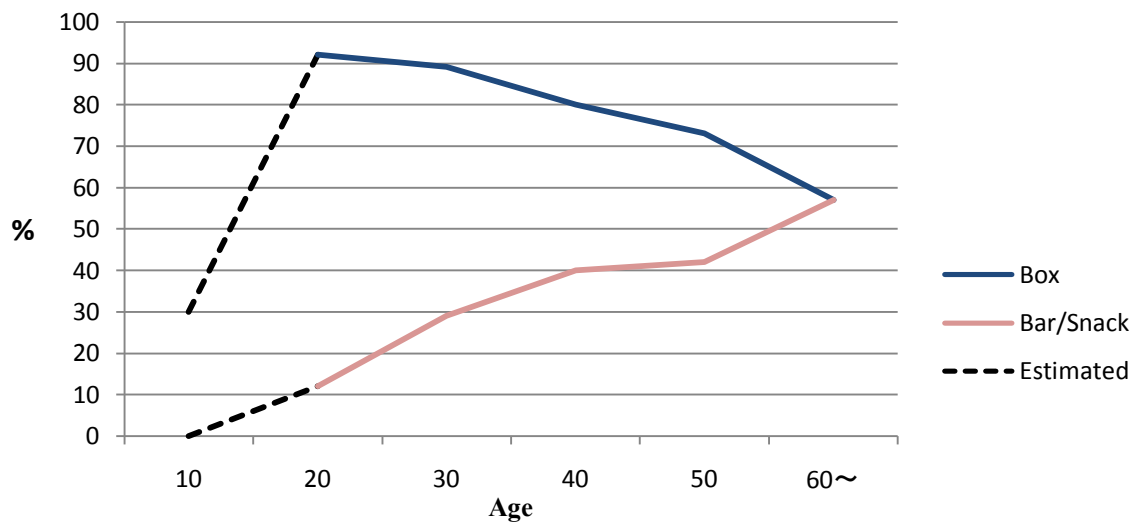


Figure 3 - Karaoke Participants By Age and Space  
(Adapted from [www.asahigroup-holdings.com](http://www.asahigroup-holdings.com))



### Types of Spaces and Gender Characteristics

It would be naive to simply assume that the aforementioned age groups all frequent karaoke spaces the same amount, always frequent the same types of spaces, or frequent for the same reasons. Many factors play a part in what spaces are frequented and who frequents them—two of which are the age and gender of the participant. Though males and females and those of different ages do sometimes frequent the same spaces for the same reasons, variations can be seen with the frequency, types of spaces, and reasons for frequenting karaoke spaces.

Figure 4 shows karaoke attendance of males and females of all ages, besides those under ten years old, in 1995 and 2002. Regardless of the decline of use in karaoke in

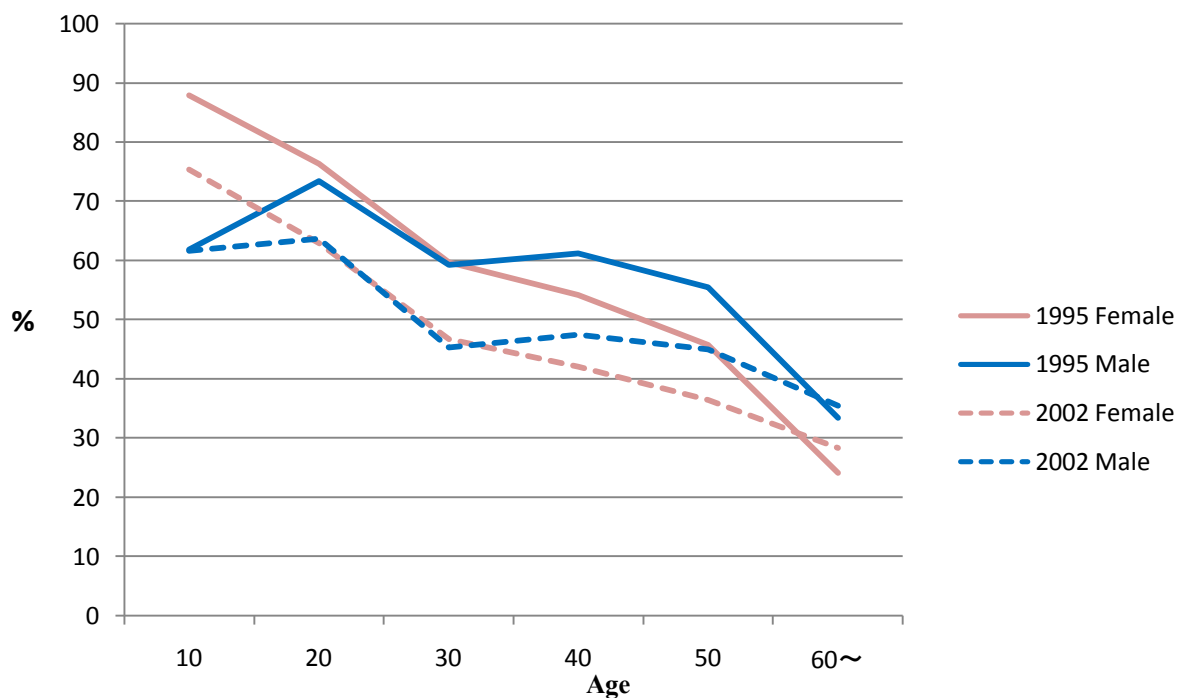


Figure 4 - Karaoke Attendance by Age and Sex  
(Adapted from Yoka Kaihatsu Center 1996 and 2003 Leisure White Book)

general from 1995 to 2002, it can be noticed that the participation by age and gender remain proportionately nearly the same from year to year. This indicates that there is something about the relationship between age and gender when it comes to karaoke. From 10 to 20 years old, females decrease in karaoke use while males increase in use, meeting at approximately the same point at age 20. Both male and female karaoke attendance declines until about the age of 30, though they are both even during this entire time. After about the age of 30, the attendance of males goes up slightly and then continues to fall back down, falling proportionately with that of the females from about age 50.

There is one conundrum, however—before age 20, a higher percentage of females frequent karaoke, while after age 30, it is males who are the ones with a higher percentage of frequenting. Since the sexes tend to somewhat follow models of their own genders, men and women usually lead very different lives accordingly. Depending on one's sex for instance, they may be more likely to have a career, or be a stay-at-home mom. Though there are some stay-at-home dads in Japan as well, this is certainly far from the norm. In addition to age, the different social life of a person will have an effect on what kinds of karaoke spaces they participate in. Regarding the incongruence of karaoke attendance of the youth according to sex, a reason for this may be the different activities that boys and girls are interested in at that age. In general, boys are more active in sports or other physical activities than girls (Jacobs, Vernon and Eccles 2005: 250). One is more likely to see boys engaging in sports or other physical and outdoor activities. Young girls will be more likely than boys to participate in activities within the home or within physical structures. Thus, when they do go outside of the home with their friends,

they are more likely to frequent places that are indoors such as shopping or—more relevant to this thesis—the karaoke box.

Though there are other types of karaoke spaces such as hotels and venues that can be reserved for company or other private parties, two spaces dominate karaoke in Japan—the bar and the box. Snack (*sunakku*) are similar to bars and will thus mostly be grouped together for the purposes of this paper. Much participant observation has led me to believe that the karaoke bar is a more formal and less private setting than the karaoke box—sometimes you know the people you are with, and sometimes there are people you have not yet met or that are anywhere in between this and good friends. This can also be said for karaoke boxes; a participant is usually with friends, but there are some situations in which one might find themselves around people they do not know or are less acquainted with. However, it would be rare to find a group of people at the karaoke box where no one knows another person. From observations I have found that the box is a place where people go to be with their friends or people from work. In any case, people with groups at the karaoke box will know at least one of the other people in the group, and will usually know them all. If people are with friends, they are likely to act more at ease than when they are with strangers, which helps the atmosphere in the karaoke box to be more relaxed. In addition, karaoke box establishments consist of multiple separated, private rooms—without rule-guiding bartenders, of course—which gives the participants more freedom as they are able to follow their own rules depending on the composition of the group.

If one were to observe the activity taking place in a karaoke bar, they would notice an older male population in general, and would also notice a well-mannered scene

where everyone follows the above mentioned rules, and respects the establishment as well as their fellow patrons. This does not mean that it is a dull atmosphere. In fact, people talk regularly and frequently laugh—sometimes hysterically. It simply means that a proper etiquette is more strictly observed. Now if one were to observe the situation in a karaoke box, they would likely find a younger clientele acting in accordance with their own rules. They may or may not sing songs in succession and monopolize the microphone, sing when extremely drunk, listen to others when they are singing, sing songs written for the opposite sex, or sing songs that were written by very gifted writers (Maruyama, 1991, as referred to above). In fact, some of these rules do not even really apply to karaoke boxes. Actions in karaoke boxes can be quite different than in bars and other karaoke spaces.

The main activities in bars are to eat, drink, and converse—karaoke is merely a side activity along with such activities as playing darts, amongst others, though karaoke is a much more regular activity and done often. Thus, when someone is singing, the main activity occurring in the establishment is singing; though a person may still be eating, drinking, and even conversing to some extent during a song, they will be listening to the singer and be more into the performance, applauding “between verses and at the end of the song” (Ogawa 1998: 47).

Contrary to karaoke bars, the main activity in karaoke boxes is to sing. My observations are that side activities include drinking—either non-alcoholic or alcoholic beverages—and eating, though choices of food and drink vary greatly depending on the karaoke establishment. While someone is singing, others may be paying attention or not, depending on what is going on at the moment—people may be talking with others,

looking up songs to sing, going to refill their drinks, going to the restroom, or doing any number of other things. Though those at karaoke bars may also be acting in a somewhat similar manner, karaoke boxes are generally more relaxed since groups govern themselves and participants know each other more-so than at bars. The only reason one would really need to leave the space at bars is to use the restroom, while participants may leave the space at boxes to retrieve drinks and/or food, though in many boxes, there is also a delivery service. However, to request a delivery, one must use the interphone or ask an employee when they come into the room. Conversation is not “nonexistent” at boxes as Ogawa (1998: 48) claims—participants talk during and in between songs as they desire. In addition, participants frequently skip the end of songs or even stop half way through if they have had enough (Ogawa 1998: 48). Furthermore, I have come to realize through participant observation that saving any time by ending a song prematurely when there are no more vocal parts—or the same lyrics seem to go on forever at the end of a song—is a common practice in boxes, especially when there are time constraints, i.e., your paid time is coming to an end. However, such time constraints do not exist at karaoke bars. Additionally, the karaoke bar is used only for the purposes that have been laid out for it which include eating, socializing and singing. However, the karaoke box can—and is—used for many purposes besides just singing, which will be elaborated on below.

From the time karaoke was invented in the early 1970s, it never really was designed to attract women as they were “thought to spend less money on hobbies, compared to men and young people” (Oku 1998: 56). It must be noted, however, that this statement does not exclude female youth, who would be much more likely to

frequent karaoke boxes than older women. Karaoke “was first introduced in bars and other drinking places” and moved into other spaces such as the karaoke box, though these two spaces aimed to attract men and youth, respectively (Oku 1998: 55-56). It must be stated that though karaoke boxes appeal greatly to the younger generations, they have also gained some ground among housewives in recent years (Sugimoto 2010: 258).

As can be seen from Figure 5 (the legend of all pie charts relates from the top down and clockwise), bars catered mainly to men—58% of the customers were middle-aged and elderly men, while 28% were young business men—which was a combined total of 86% of participation. Figure 6 depicts the majority usage of karaoke boxes by the youth: combining high school and university students with young adults, this group accounted for 66% participation. Another 13% of participants were families, which do include women, but these women come in a package with children and/or husband or other relatives. Though these two main karaoke spaces were neither designed nor designated for the use of middle-age to older women, other avenues came about to satisfy the need for women to find entertainment and revel in nostalgia with those who may have been or were going through the same experiences as they. However, not all women are in the same situations—some may be single and some may be married. Being single and being married are two factors that influence the decisions to frequent different karaoke spaces. It also depends on their jobs and life circumstances. There are three main types of married women—those who are part-time workers and part-time housewives, those who are career women, and those who are full-time housewives (Sugimoto 2010: 171-75).

The women who have more free time will obviously be more likely to be able to take part in extra-curricular activities more often. All but the career women are likely to

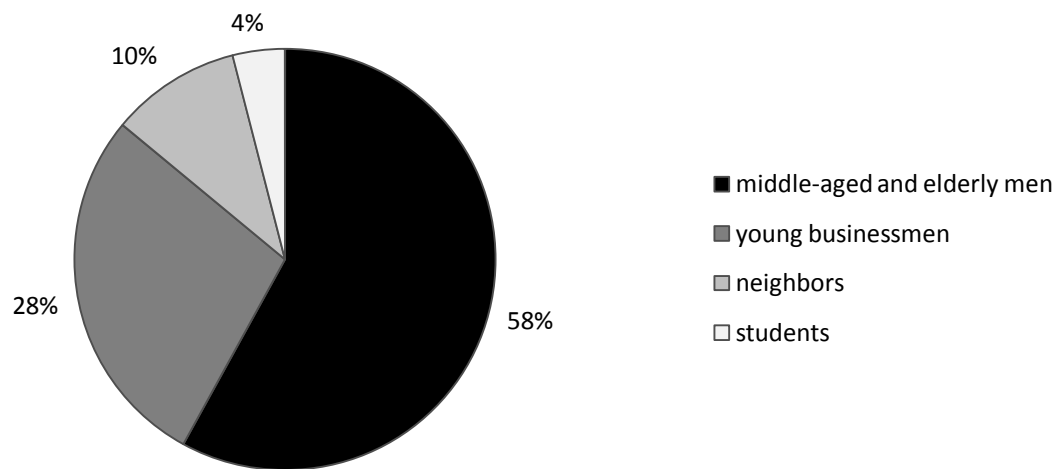


Figure 5 - Customers of Karaoke Bars  
(Adapted from Oku, 1998)

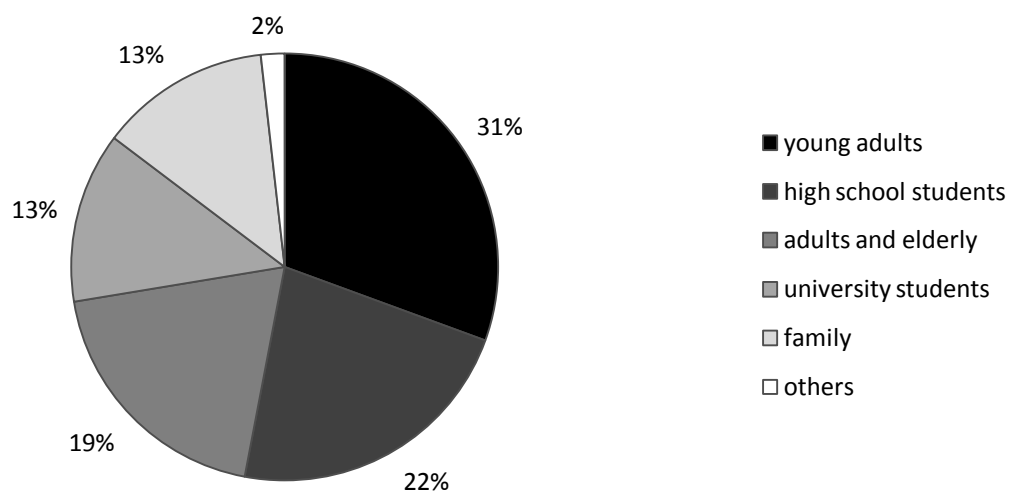


Figure 6 – Customers of Karaoke Boxes  
(Adapted from Oku, 1998)

have more time to participate in karaoke, though that does not mean that career women do not ever go to karaoke. However, as some of the noncareer women have part-time jobs, and some have other obligations to their families, their time can be extremely limited in both amount and in terms of particular times of the day. The women who are part-time workers and part-time housewives will not have a lot of time because they may be working for half of the day and taking care of their family for the other half of the day. However, there still may be a few extra hours that they have time to go to karaoke coffee shops. Even full-time housewives can be limited with time due to chores around the house, and preparing their children for school and going to pick them up. Owing to less time-constraining activities, they have more free time and may choose to fill this free time with certain activities—one of which is karaoke.

Before some karaoke bars open up for the evening, they are karaoke coffee shops. During the day, these are for women to come and get something to eat or drink, possibly meet others, and sing karaoke. These karaoke coffee shops share characteristics with karaoke bars and karaoke boxes, but they also differ greatly, and fall between bars and boxes when it comes to many things such as the above mentioned strictness or lenience with rules. The customers of these coffee shops range from their thirties to their sixties, and are mainly women. Though men sometimes also patronize these spaces, they rarely do, as the shop's business hours are in the afternoon when the men are more than likely to be at work.

According to Oku (1998: 59), these karaoke coffee shops are where people can go by themselves, they can quickly make friends, participants do not need to drink alcohol, and participants can sing for up to four hours and need only pay a small amount. These



spaces are very organized—a proprietress will serve the customer and bring them a card upon which the customer will write the name of a song they wish to sing. There will then be a singing order and one must wait their turn like in any other karaoke space. Here, the audience pays more attention during the song and the only discussion may be about their impressions of the performance and will be during the instrumental interludes—not during the singing. It would be expected that these spaces would be much like karaoke bars due to age and type of space, and they are in many respects as seen above. They are public spaces that are a little more formal—more-so than the box. However, there are some rules in these shops that are also somewhat more relaxed—more-so than is seen at bars. Contrary to karaoke bars—and also more extremely than is seen at karaoke boxes—for example, people can sing the same song over and over again if they so choose (Oku 1998: 59). In addition, a person can ask others to critique their singing of the songs, which is not very likely to happen in bars and boxes. These karaoke coffee shops filled a void—now women had a place for karaoke too. Also, as can be seen from the experience that takes place at these spaces, karaoke is the surface phenomenon. The social functions of these spaces include filling free time, constructing imagined communities of women in the same situations, and social healing. These housewives ventured into this new activity to fulfill their own individual desires, but then also quickly made friends and became a part of a group.

There are some facilities that surpass many of these above stereotypes and trends. Such facilities include hotels, inns, and other places, where “differences of generation or gender do not apply” (Oku 1998: 58). According to Figure 7, “middle-aged and elderly” (either sex) and “middle-aged and elderly couples” (both sexes) constitute 54% of the

customers, while “young couples” (both sexes) and “youngsters in a group” (either sex) comprise 38% of the customers. Though not many young children seem to be frequenting, there are some who go with their families, most likely in the group labeled “others.” This is consistent with the data above that show a smaller percentage of karaoke usage by young children. As stated above, strict karaoke rules do not seem to apply to these spaces, since which rules are observed will depend on who is using the karaoke room at any time. The karaoke spaces at many of these places are generally communal, meaning that types of groups may vary—one may see exclusively youngsters, elderly, males, females, singles, couples, families, friends, acquaintances, strangers, or a mix of any two or more of these types of groups. Thus, the above rules regarding age, space, and gender do not always apply to these spaces—it all depends on the makeup of

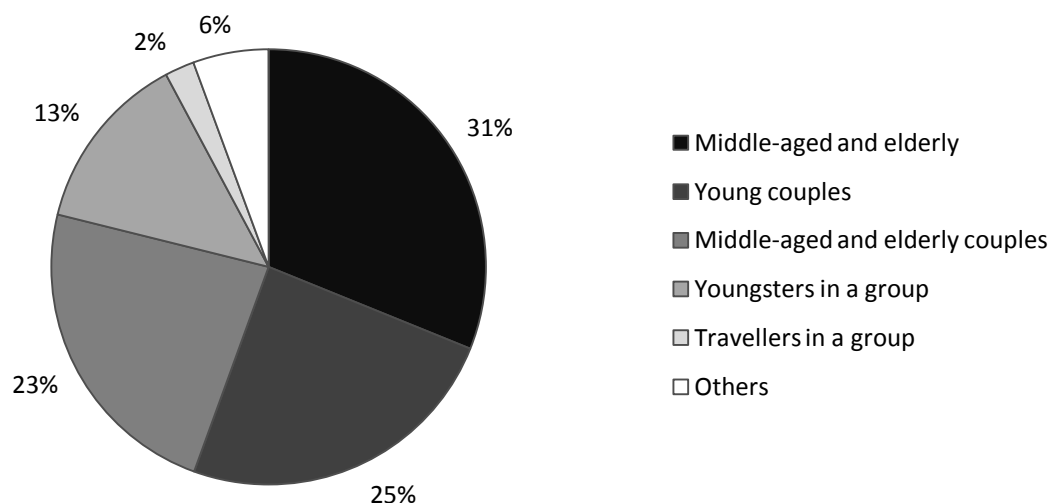


Figure 7 - Customers of Hotels, Inns, and Other Places  
(Adapted from Oku, 1998)

the group in the karaoke space. Rules may be more relaxed if a group of friends has occupied the room, but if an elderly couple enters and joins in, a stricter observance of rules is likely to be seen if only due to manners, politeness, and out of respect for their elders and other people in general.

Another characteristic relating to gender and rules in karaoke bars—and also likely to be observed in karaoke coffee shops—can be seen with which sex can sing which kinds of songs. If you recall, the main genre of song sung in karaoke bars is *enka*. This type of song “can be divided into two groups: one called *Onna-uta* are sung by female singers and express female feelings, and the other called *Otoko-uta* are sung by male singers and express male feelings” (Oku 1998: 67). What is significant is not that there are male and female songs, but that these songs are sung by and express the feelings of the respective sexes. Furthermore, women are limited to singing the female songs, while men can sing either the male songs or the female songs, though they usually sing male songs (Oku 1998: 67). The reason this applies mostly to karaoke bars—and also likely karaoke coffee shops, but not so much karaoke boxes—is because of the more formal or strict rules in these spaces, which also have something to do with age. Age is a factor determining the space in which one is more likely to sing karaoke, and space and gender also seems to be another factor playing into the mix as seen in Figure 8. As can be seen above, there are multiple types of karaoke spaces. Each one of these spaces has a purpose and serves a function in society.

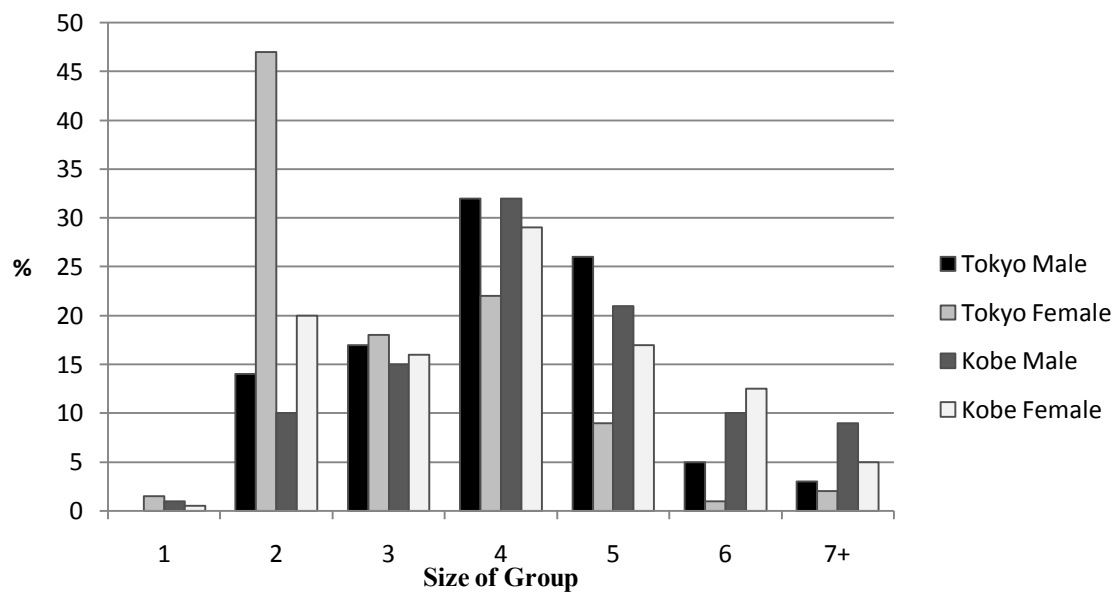


Figure 8 - Size of Karaoke Groups by Area and Sex  
(Adapted from Takahashi et al., 1995)

## CHAPTER 3

### FUNCTIONS OF THE BOX

What should be clear from the previous chapter is that although karaoke is enjoyed by all ages, not only does the frequency of singing karaoke decline with age, but the type of space that one frequents in general changes in accordance with age. Different karaoke spaces serve different functions due to the age cohorts that frequent them. Since the focus of this paper is the karaoke box and those who frequent it the most, other cohorts and karaoke spaces will not be given the same attention that will be paid to the youth and the box hereafter.

Within Japanese society, the karaoke box serves multiple functions beyond the obvious entertaining and filling of free time. The box serves as a preparation and transition from youth to adulthood, even though people of all ages frequent and enjoy the popular activity. It is also a social space, so it helps to bind society and many groups within society together. Finally, karaoke aids greatly in the socialization of younger members of society. Of course, there are other, older cohorts that frequent the box, but as shown above, frequenting the box and singing karaoke in general declines with age. Thus, the functions of the box that will be concentrated on hereafter will largely be related to the youth of Japanese society.

## **Entertainment and Free Time**

Why is it that the youth are the ones who frequent the box the most? There are some obvious and some not so obvious reasons that answer this question—karaoke is entertaining and is an activity that can fill some free time of the youth, the box is a private space to go, participation requires energy, and advertising is geared toward the youth. As increased responsibility usually comes with age, the youth are the ones who more often than not have the most free-time to do as they please. Karaoke at the box is one of myriad activities such as sports, video games, club activities at school, and dating that youth can participate in to entertain themselves and pass the time. What this entertainment does for society is maintain order by helping the youth to get together in certain activities through which they will socialize.

## **Physical Layout**

Though various kinds of layouts for karaoke boxes exist, there is one thing that seems to be common—when one sets foot into the karaoke box establishment, there is a lobby area where everyone must first enter, but then there are individual karaoke spaces to which customers will branch off with their private parties. This lobby area thus acts as a gateway that separates the outside world and the inside spaces of karaoke, through which all customers must pass.

We can understand a few things by looking at Figure 9. First, it is a type of layout that utilizes one floor only. Other types of layout include multiple floors, but with only a

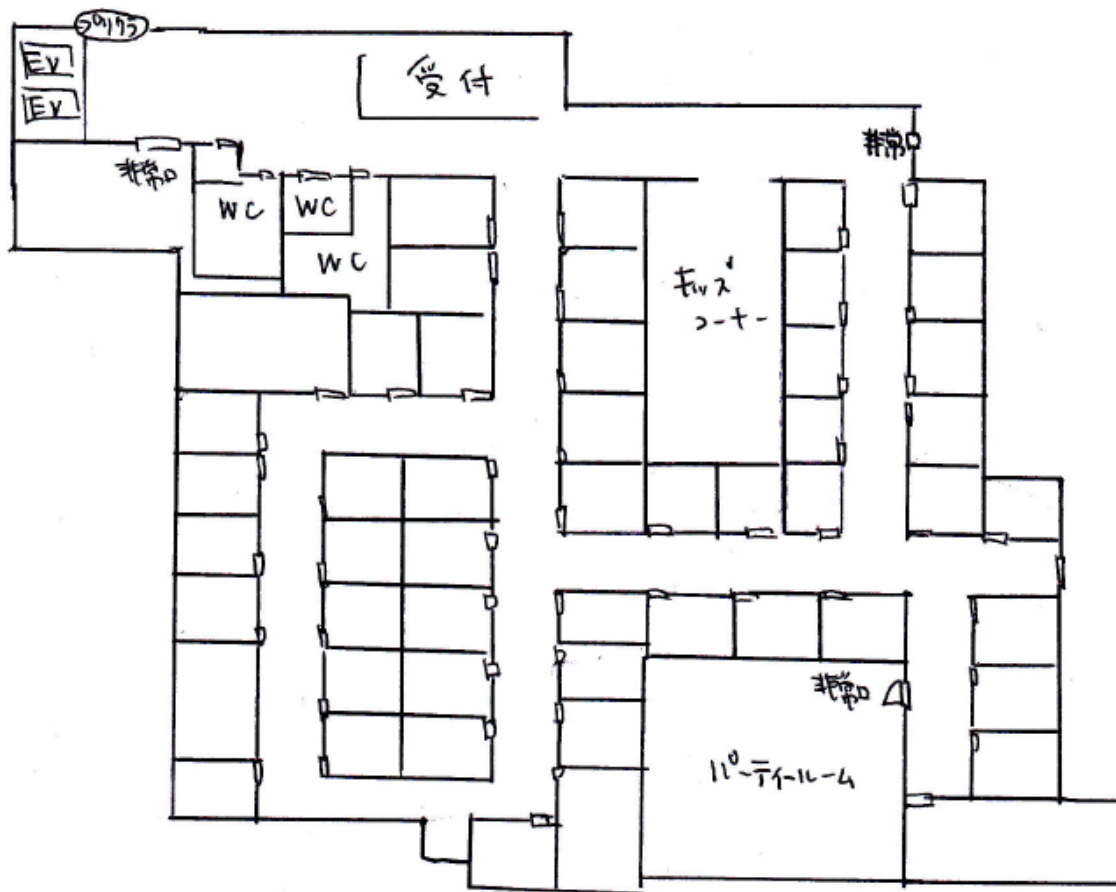


Figure 9 – One example of a karaoke box floor plan  
(Adapted from [www.aso-viva.jp](http://www.aso-viva.jp))

single hall going down each floor, and karaoke rooms on each side of the hall. Then of course, the building itself would not be as wide a building as shown in Figure 9. Yet another type of layout is one that is often utilized with ジャパンレンタカー (Japan Rentacar). The karaoke lobby actually doubles as the rental car counter area and the rooms are separated off from this lobby. In fact, this setup is similar to the two-story motel, as access to the rooms all come from outside. In the case of Japan Rentacar, not every participant must enter the lobby as stated above, since the lobby and the karaoke rooms are in separate buildings. However, someone must enter the lobby area regardless,

and the parking lot may be thought of as an extension of the lobby, which makes it identical to other karaoke box spaces.

Though there are some karaoke establishments in which every box is more or less the same, it is usually not the case that all spaces at a larger karaoke box establishment are exactly the same. Figure 9 shows that there are basically five different types of rooms which can be categorized into small, medium, large, Japanese-style, and kid's—or family—rooms, though this particular establishment has a kids' corner instead of kids' rooms. Though it does not appear on the map of the karaoke establishment in Figure 9, another type of room is the *hitokara* (one-person karaoke) room, which will be covered in more detail below.

The most popular types of rooms at karaoke boxes are the small and medium sized rooms, though this should come as no surprise as Figure 8 shows that the most common group sizes at karaoke boxes generally are made up of between two and six people. Small and medium sized rooms do not differ much in size, but medium-sized rooms do have a little bit more room or a few more seats. Groups of seven or more people can sometimes fit into the medium-sized rooms, but there are also much larger spaces for very large groups. The next type of room is the Japanese-style room which has *tatami* flooring, legless chairs and a short table. These are rare rooms and are probably only used by those who request them, which indicates that there is limited demand for these types of rooms. They are so rare that I have never used one, nor had I even heard of them until conducting research for this paper. This type of room may be used by somewhat older people who would prefer that environment over the table and soft bench environment because they may be more used to it or it may be more



comfortable to them—or rather, it may help them to simulate relaxation at their own home. This can be seen as an accommodation no matter how small on the part of the karaoke establishment for the older cohorts in order to keep them at the box later into their lives. This type of room could also be preferred simply by those who would like to relax, take their shoes off and sit and lay down on the floor. Finally, the last type of room is where the biggest and most noticeable effort to keep people frequenting the box even as they grow older can be discerned. This type of room is the kids' room (Figure 10). Not every kids' room is exactly the same, though each will be more accommodating than other rooms for those people who bring their children. These rooms commonly feature padded flooring and walls, open space, and playground toys such as a slide and a small Jungle Jim.

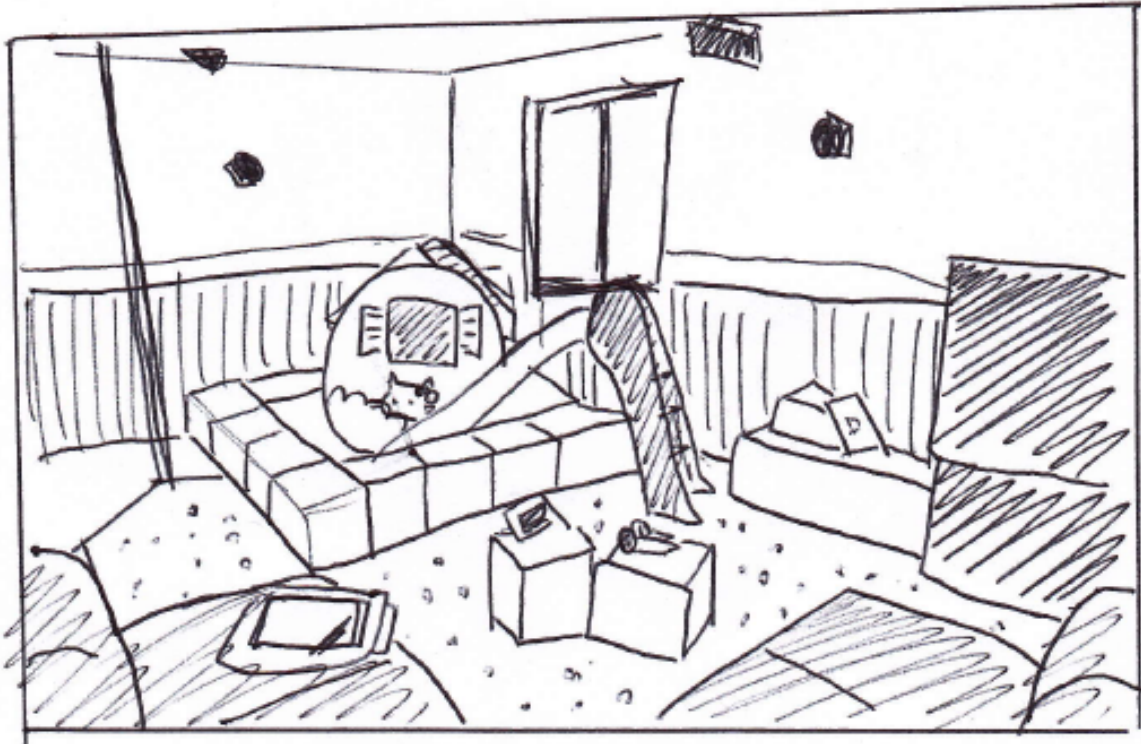


Figure 10 – One example of a kids' room at a karaoke box  
(Adapted from [www.karaoke.j-rentacar.com](http://www.karaoke.j-rentacar.com))

Another thing that is important to understand is that though the lobby is a place through which everyone must pass, the area to which they end up is a private room. Young people want to be with their friends, but at the same time, apart from the rest of society where they can do as they please—something which the box allows them to do. In the upper left-hand corner of Figure 9 is the public lobby space (the counter is marked by “受付,” its Japanese equivalent), through which everyone must enter and wait for rooms to open up. Waiting times can vary from minutes to hours. However, after passing through the lobby, the rest of the floor plan shows 50 private karaoke boxes in which participants can enjoy karaoke in their own private space. The regular rooms are typically stocked with a table surrounded by soft bench-type seats, with a television monitor at the front of the room, speakers near the ceiling in the corners, and the karaoke audio/visual equipment next to the monitor. All rooms have this basic setup with some modifications depending on the size and type of room. There are other things to be taken from Figure 9, though they will be covered below. As there are 50 private spaces in Figure 9, we cannot know what is going on behind every one of those closed doors all the time. However, one thing is for sure, especially for the youth—there is a lot of energy being used in these boxes.

Karaoke is not an activity that can be performed without a person taking deeper breaths than usual and burning some extra calories. Participation in karaoke requires energy, and even more energy is usually exerted at the box than any other karaoke space. This is because many boxes simply have more space, the box is much more of a private space than other karaoke spaces, one is with friends more often and the atmosphere is more relaxed because of this, which greatly encourages the physical use of any open

space. At the karaoke box, the group controls who can be in the same room and participate in the activity—in other words, the karaoke box is a space where youth can go to be with their friends and where their parents cannot interfere or see what they are doing. They are free to let all inhibitions go and use all the energy in their storehouses. In fact, I have seen that they often become somewhat drunk with craziness in the process. The box allows this whereas other karaoke spaces do not. This is another reason why so many youth choose to frequent the box over other spaces. In line with this, certain ages of this group of youth are not even supposed to frequent other karaoke spaces such as bars because they are not legally old enough to drink alcohol. However, this is not the only reason why youth frequent the box—advertising is another reason.

Karaoke boxes thrive due to the youth market and largely stay like this because boxes cater to the youth market and aim their advertising at them. First of all, advertising is geared towards the youth. Nearly all advertisements on the internet for karaoke boxes depict young people. The youth are who have the most open free time—no major commitments to others and no dependents amongst other things. Of course, they may be busy with school, clubs, and cram schools, but outside of that time, they are free to do what they wish—more so than other age cohorts. Second, the physical surroundings are designed to appeal to the youth, even more so than the internet. If one were to step into and take a stroll through a karaoke box establishment, it would soon be very clear to whom the advertisements are being targeted and for whom the surroundings were made. Posters within karaoke boxes are generally of youthful singers such as members of AKB48, a famous singing group of young girls in Japan. Upon entering Jankara karaoke establishments in the summer of 2012, I was immediately greeted with an AKB48 poster

and was surrounded by posters such as this throughout the building. In addition, music played in the lobbies of the establishments and also in the boxes on the machines is what young people are most likely to know and enjoy, so the general atmosphere is more comfortable for the young than for older customers. Thus, it seems to be a synergistic circle. The advertising on the internet and in the boxes is made to attract the youth, but the youth also inspire the advertising. Because of the closed nature of this loop, the youth frequent the box less and less as they get older.

### **Space and Social Function**

Although some people still frequent karaoke boxes on a regular basis even as they grow older, most people frequent them less. Many stop going altogether, and some start to frequent the bar rather than the box. Since some sort of a transition occurs from the box to the bar as one ages, it would seem that this transition from the box to the bar is also connected with the social transition from youth to adulthood. This transition can be seen through the construction and layout of individual rooms that can be seen as a tactic to aid indirectly in the transition from youth to adult, but also as a way to keep people frequenting karaoke boxes even into later years of their lives.

Karaoke boxes have been built in a way that allows them to accommodate different numbers and types of people. Owners of karaoke boxes can easily access data on the age and frequency of karaoke-goers and are quite aware of the fact that the youth are their main customers. These owners realize that as people start their careers and begin to have families, their time is taken by other obligations, and they frequent karaoke

boxes less and less. Though this is seen as being somewhat inevitable, the owners try to compensate for the decline by building spaces that can be used by families.

The point of the childrens type of room is to provide a place where people who have children can frequent karaoke without having to worry about taking care of them or leaving them in the care of others. Even if these children do not sing, they can entertain themselves or even sleep on the padded floor. They can also get habituated into going to karaoke boxes when they get older. Parents have been habituated into going to boxes when they were younger. One indirect function of these kids' rooms is to help box goers to have a longer and smoother transition from one youthful activity to other activities that are more adult oriented. While the rooms provide a kind of community service, it is highly unlikely that this is the main motivation for owners of karaoke boxes to build kids' rooms. These karaoke box owners are businessmen and likely built kids' rooms in order to extend the age at which people frequent the box as much as possible.

It must be noted that those who frequent these kids' rooms are mostly mothers with their children and other women since the fathers are at work in most situations throughout the week. This does not mean, however, that fathers and other men do not ever frequent these spaces, just that fewer opportunities exist for them to frequent the boxes during the day than mothers. As the *Jankara* karaoke website states, one can be at ease while they sing, knowing that their children are right there with them and that they can play without getting hurt. This type of room would make anyone with qualms about going with their children actually want to go. In fact, due to the low cost of renting the room and all of the free optional services that come with the room (see below), many people have actually started frequenting karaoke on a regular basis. The spaces are also

for pre-school children where women might otherwise have to spend money on daycare. Moreover, daycare hours are rather limited, but boxes can fill the time gaps. These kids' rooms are also a way to maximize the use of the spaces because there is less use of the karaoke box during the daytime than at night.

### **Socialization**

As mentioned above, the youth are in process of learning how to live properly within society. As it is mostly the youth who frequent the box, rules are not as strict because they are still being learned. The box is also preparing youth for adulthood and helping with the transition in this manner. The fact that the box is a social space also helps greatly with this preparation and transition.

As the box mainly caters to and is used by young people, one large function of the box is social cohesion of groups of youth, which in turn helps to bind society. In this section, I analyze the average size of groups at karaoke boxes, the type of socialization that takes place there, and the communication that goes on between performer and audience.

As shown by Figure 8, the sizes of groups of karaoke participants in Japan can vary between both large and small groups. Though there are some minor differences, the important information that is to be taken from this is that the dominant group size going to karaoke is four. It is the highest number for every category except for Tokyo females, where it is second highest. As the graph indicates, karaoke is largely a social activity, almost never a solitary activity. As will be discussed below, even though the popularity

of *hito-kara*—or going to karaoke by oneself—has risen recently, this does not mean that karaoke is becoming a solitary activity.

A person does learn a great deal from their parents, but the home is not the most important place for a person to learn how to fit in and become a member of society as they pass through the transition from youth to adulthood according to social psychologist Judith Harris (Harris, 1995). As a person grows older, they will generally meet more people and establish more social relations outside of the family (Triandis 1995: 62), which are vital to one's development in society. According to Harris (1998: 229), youth in their early to mid teens start to identify more with their peers than with their parents, and they then modify their behavior to fit with the behavior of their peers. This system of socialization (Harris, 2006) helps us to fit in with and become members of the larger society. Karaoke is one of the many activities that aid in this process of socialization of members into society. As mentioned above, the karaoke box presents a private space away from any interference of parents or other authority figures that is available for youth to pass the time and socialize. They learn for themselves how to form groups based on mutual interest, how to establish norms of acceptance, and how to communicate more effectively with others in their group.

This kind of socialization is a necessary step in the transition from youth to adulthood, showing that the box is a part of the play of life. The box is the scene, and everyone that participates is an actor. The details of what will happen are not usually known beforehand, but what does happen is based on a general plot “which becomes real only as individuals act on their perceptions of it” (Hastrup 2004: 223). In addition to the box acting as a stage itself, it is also a part of the play. The preparation and transition that

takes place with the youth must happen in some way or another. There are many places and situations where this can happen, but the karaoke box is an especially inviting space due to its privacy, intimacy and the erasure of inhibitions found there among friends who can also be said to be the performers and the audience.

### **Performer and Audience**

In *The Karaoke Dilemma* (1998), Casey Lum analyzed karaoke both in terms of a social and a performative space. Participants play the parts of both the observer and the performer. The performer stands out by selecting and singing the songs they want, putting their emotions into it, showing off their talents, or lack thereof, and offering their interpretation of a commonly known song. The observer can be seen as cooperating with the scene through sitting back and assisting the performer. In addition, the observer can also join in the performance at any time by playing instruments, such as the tambourine, while still being part of the audience. Furthermore, by joining in on vocals at certain parts during songs, such as the chorus, a member of the audience can switch between these two roles within the same song—even though he or she may or may not be the main singer. This may be done randomly, by singing a duet, or by trading the microphone between people (Ogawa 1998: 46). In addition, both the performer and the audience can also be seen as cooperating by abiding by the “rules” of Japanese karaoke as covered below. In this manner, a karaoke participant can simultaneously be both observer and performer. All participants are expected to take turns as both audience and performer no matter how skilled they are (Ogawa, 1993), which adds to the supportiveness or politeness of the audience when others are performing (Lum 1998: 173). There is also an



“understanding among participants in the karaoke space that they should support their co-existence throughout the event without interruption” (Lum 1998: 174). Lum continues by positing that “collectivism comes before individualism in the karaoke script,” and that by following this script, a group membership is developed, which offers the “security and mutual support” that is needed before they can express their individualism by stepping into the limelight and singing. Without this support, it becomes difficult to set yourself apart from the others. In this manner, participants at the box learn to be a part of a group by having a duty and acting properly and accordingly with the social atmosphere. This effectively ensures that these participants will learn how to be better members of society, adding to the socialization that the box provides. The social aspect of the box can be readily seen with groups of people, but is not so easily recognized when only one person goes to the box.

### ***Hitokara***

Though it is not very common—as most karaoke boxes cater to groups of two or more people—there are some people who go to the karaoke box by themselves. Within about the past five years, there has been a boom in *hitokara*, a shortened form of *hitori de karaoke*, which translates into one-person karaoke, or doing karaoke by oneself. It might be difficult to understand how *hitokara* can constitute a social activity, and what kind of social function it provides. However, the preparation, simultaneous participation, competition and participation—via the internet—shows that *hitokara* is not simply an individual activity.

One reason why people frequent *hitokara* is because they want to become better at singing karaoke, or at least better prepared for when they sing karaoke with others. Singing alone can be entertaining, but it is usually more fun when singing with others, as can be understood from Figure 8. When people go to *hitokara*, they are doing so with the future in their mind—they are preparing for and thinking of future activities of karaoke where they will be singing and interacting with others in the box. Thus, even though they are by themselves, they are not simply thinking of themselves, but are participating with the intent of improving to perform well for others. They are visualizing that they are in fact performing in front of others, just without the inhibition that one might have in front of a physical audience. The audience in this case is virtual, either in the present or in preparation for the future. Regarding the youth and their actions in general, a performer's actions “may need to be rehearsed in private” or “within a restricted circle of close associates until perfected, in order for the actor to avoid embarrassment and disorientation and censure on the part of the wider “audience”” (Abbot-Chapman and Robertson 2009: 420), which is especially true of the youth (Crawford and Rossiter 2006: 133). This also fits quite well with karaoke as people sing with less inhibition when alone, so they can optimally prepare how they would perform with friends at the box. Performing alone at the box is analogous to singing in the shower, but one difference with *hitokara* is that the same setting in which one practices karaoke can actually be the identical setting for future performances in groups. Another difference is that one can connect to a virtual audience and compare performances with others over the internet. For this reason, people engage in *hitokara* to prepare for this certain future and to make sure that the “play” they take part in goes smoothly.

*Hitokara* also helps people be a part of an imagined community of performers. Frequenters of karaoke are quite aware that thousands of others across Japan are also concurrently—or at different times—singing karaoke in the same type of situation, and may even be singing the exact same song at the same instant, which is the second way of making the box a social space. As there are thousands of people simultaneously participating in karaoke—and singing evaluation systems can be found at many karaoke boxes—this ensures competition even though someone may be physically alone.

Karaoke boxes are replete with straight forward methods of competition, such as point systems that rate the singer's performance depending on various factors such as pitch and loudness. The rating and score of the song will show up on the screen afterwards, allowing participants to compare their performances to others and even enter into contests. This is very much like video games and the communities that form around them—there are thousands of games in online communities where participants compete against each other. This competition does not tear these communities apart, but actually allows them to form bonds or strengthens them. Win or lose, members of these communities remain friends with other members, and keep coming back to participate. Most boxes have systems that offer the capability of rating your performance with others. Once a participant finishes singing, their performance will be rated and then their ranking will be displayed on the screen, nestled between the scores of others who sang the same song. However, I have observed that the ranking of the other people and their scores are nearly the same as any participant, so said participants will feel like they are among equals, having a good time—not being placed into a status distinct hierarchy. Instead, they can gauge their abilities and find others who are at a comparable level to themselves.

These people share hobbies and other interests; therefore, it serves a purpose of bringing these people together even if it is just over the internet. In addition to these participants being at the same level skill-wise, they are also more than likely to be in approximately the same life stage as the majority of users of the box are in the younger cohort as seen from Figures 1, 2 and 3.

### **Not Just Singing**

As has been made clear by now, singing is not all that is happening at karaoke boxes. This can also be said for other karaoke spaces, but especially with boxes because nearly everything that happens at other spaces can happen at boxes, and then some. This section will cover all else that happens in the box beyond the obvious, both consciously and subconsciously.

The box used to be a space where the only obvious activity was to sing, which comes as no surprise since that is the purpose for which it was designed. Since then, however, the box has come to be used for many other activities that go beyond this basic use of singing. First, the box is used by youth to “hang out,” which also translates into solidifying social relationships, amongst other things, and second the box provides the space or facilities to engage in a multiplicity of activities.

Just like in the United States, the Japanese youth congregate with their friends in multiple places whether it be in their houses or the karaoke box. While they frequent the box and nearly always sing while there, singing could even be secondary to other activities like talking, goofing off, drinking, and eating. What happens at the box can

occur in other social spaces, but the box is completely private and soundproof, providing for more unencumbered activities.

During a casual interview while in Japan, I became aware of another activity that takes place in the karaoke box, which is that of a sexual nature. I was very surprised to know that it happens, but it happens enough that most frequenters of the box would find nothing surprising about it. In fact, when one thinks about it, it would be surprising if sexual activity did not take place at the box. With two people in a private, soundproof and dark or dimly lit space, it is not surprising that this kind of behavior would happen. Using the box for sexual purposes may actually be a part of the social learning process that the youth go through to become adults. These participants are learning how to interact with others in different situations.

As the box is a dark, private space, another use of it is hijacking the television screen and using it for one's own purposes, such as showing videos, watching movies, playing games, etc. I have personally done this without first knowing that it could even be done. This was especially useful for me as I was with friends in Osaka—away from my home in Mie—and I wanted to show them some videos of some of our trips around Japan that I filmed and edited to music. I simply found the correct hookups on the monitor and all went smoothly. Though we also sang karaoke, this was one of the main activities that we participated in that evening.

People have been making their own uses of the box for years; now boxes are acknowledging this fact and capitalizing on it. On the website of the famous karaoke box establishment, *Jankara*, for example, they encourage people to bring their own possessions such as their laptop and game systems from home and connect them to the

monitor. What makes it easier for people to bring these things in is that the box also provides multiple outlet extension cords and access to the internet. By being able to bring these items in, one could play video games or surf the internet with their friends for hours in the box. In addition, access to the internet is often offered at the box, which is a cheaper alternative to internet at home. All this may seem borderline *otaku*, a negative term describing a person who is obsessed with gaming and other online activities beyond what is considered normal, and thus going against this idea of socialization. However, these activities are typically supplemental to the social form of singing. Furthermore, a person does not become antisocial in these situations—they are with other people and converse and have fun with them while taking part in these other activities, just as they would when singing.

Before continuing with this thought, it is necessary to briefly mention rules that should be observed at karaoke spaces. Within the rules of karaoke can be seen a connection between age, space and gender. According to Naoki Ueno (1993), who wrote with the purpose of teaching people how to sing karaoke better, including how to behave properly in the karaoke space, there are certain rules that should be adhered to while participating in karaoke. A singer should not monopolize the microphone, should listen to others when they sing, and should not sing ostentatiously, too good, or with too much or not enough emotion. Keizaburou Maruyama (1991: 51-7; English quoted from Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998: 18) adds to this with seven behavioral taboos.

- Do not sing when you are drunk
- Do not sing too loudly
- Do not abuse the echo effect
- Do not monopolize the microphone

- Do not sing songs written for the opposite sex unless you want to surprise the audience
- Do not sing songs composed by very gifted writers (because they are usually too difficult for lay persons)
- Do not be too narcissistic

Variations of these rules—once implicit, but now somewhat explicit—can also be found in other works, both scholarly and otherwise (Ueno 1993; and Suntory Quarterly, 1992). Ogawa (1998: 46-47) also wrote about three “hidden” rules: “people must not sing two songs in succession,” “people must not sing the same songs that others have sung,” and “when others are singing, people must applaud between verses and at the end of the song.” Ogawa’s explanations for these rules are that everyone will have the opportunity to sing, and they ensure prevention of boredom and competition. These implicit or explicit rules, however, do not seem to apply equally for all ages and spaces. For example, the younger generations are more relaxed with these rules than are the older generations (Mitsui and Hosokawa 1998: 19). One reason is because early on in life, the youth are still learning how to be a part of society. They lack the proper education through experiences, but are making ground every day. Thus, even if they are aware of certain rules, they may choose to not follow them depending on how they feel and what situations they are in. These rules aid in socialization and teach how to act in society—not just with karaoke, but with social rules in general.

If the above offered extra options at the karaoke box were not enough, *Jankara* also provides many other things for the customer’s entertainment and to make them more comfortable. This includes cell phone chargers, DVD and Blu-ray players, board games, card games, party games, and toys for kids. This relaxation of traditional rules in the space of the karaoke box is an indication of a less restrained environment more suitable

for younger or more intimate groups, and that the actual function of the box in society is not necessarily just singing, but has a more social effect—it brings people together and helps to solidify their relationships, thus warranting a change in policy and offerings.



## CONCLUSION

The Japanese karaoke box is important to Japanese society far beyond its entertainment value. It helps to create and maintain harmony between those who frequent together, but also within society in general. The box provides a place for the youth to mingle with others and is largely physically secluded from the eyes of society. Without the inhibitions that being around adults would come with, the youth can practice and find out for themselves how to communicate with others which is ultimately a major skill that would be beneficial to hone for when they are adults. The box works outside of the traditional structure—i.e., the home—to enforce structure within society. This helps out with the youth most of all because structure is mainly needed with young people as they are learning where they fit in with society and how to do so.

There is pressure to go to the box because the youth want—and are pressured—to conform. Being a part of society is looked upon highly—especially in Japan—so it will be advantageous to these young people if they go. Due to the interactions that youth go through at the box, they also learn proper behavior and how to act appropriately when dealing with others in society.

The box also offers a place for youth to prolong the transition into adult roles, but also aids in this transition. The karaoke box has a large connection with age. This is in terms of who frequents, but also relates to the transition that youth are going through and it aids in this process to adulthood. The physical layout of the box is connected with the

type of people who frequent and as has been shown, the boxes have been trying to keep the youth frequenting their establishments longer by aiding with the adult transitions that happen—such as getting married and having children.

The social aspect of the box is so strong that even when someone is participating in karaoke by themselves, it is a social activity. Going to the box is much more than just an activity—it has deeper meanings and effects on society. Whether it be teaching how to communicate with others, strengthening ties, or carrying the youth through a transition into adulthood, the box has higher implications for the people which it serves and for those with whom these customers come in contact. The box appeals to all ages and can work similarly for anyone. However, it has the most immediate and apparent effect on the 14 to 25 youthful cohort as they are the ones who are most in need of the assistance and guidance that can be found there. It is a second home to the youth, one where they can come and go as they please, communicate with others, regenerate to be able to take on problems that may be found outside, and where they can prepare for situations that will occur throughout the rest of their lives—no matter how often one frequents.

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